

STRANGER THAN FICTION

Down To Earth

My parents tell me that as a small child I had nightmares and was a sleepwalker, and that my dreams and evening strolls were of things flying in the sky and escapades in high places. Now I am an air-pilot and still up in the air.

Yet I remember one occasion--it was day time too, and I was never more wide awake--when I was very much interested in coming down to earth. However, no matter my interest, it was a sure thing that I would light somewhere. But it was the privilege of picking my own port that I yearned for--a soft, spacious spot--and which was denied me. The landing I made! neither I nor any man since has experienced. Nevertheless, I squatted happily, although it was in an environment which was sad, mournful, and wet with tears.

The incident I am relating happened just after the World War when I was barnstorming the country as a stunt flyer like many another air-minded loon. My ship was a hashed-up job just about the size of a modern-apartment bath tub. And like ninety percent of the crates that left the ground in those days it was an open cockpit bi-plane. But it could fly!

Some of the ex-war pilots had gathered for a stunt circus in a little town just outside Boston and we had given the natives some fair entertainment for their money without actually spilling death-blood. But a stingier bunch of Down Easterners I have neither before nor since laid eyes upon! When we got through playing tag with

Circle
 the ~~circle~~ over their cow pastures, my share of the jack pot was a tank of gas and three bucks. Disgusted with life I took off for Trenton in a fog so thick a snow-plough, tied to the front end of the Hindenburg, would have had trouble butting through.

But having had such a miserly pay-off in New England I had to get to Trenton where an old war buddy of mine was gathering some of the old gang for an air circus at the Jersey State Fair. Of course the boys up in Massachusetts warned me about the fog. And in those days radios in planes and beams and Federal weather reports were unheard of; yet I took their advice lightly.

When my ship left the ground it was ten o'clock in the morning. The sky looked like the bottom of a coffee pot. I flew south, following the coast-line. After being ⁱⁿ the air a half an hour I would gladly have turned back had I thought the blackness behind me any less than that in front of me.

By eleven o'clock all I knew was that I was headed south. Whether or not I was over land or sea was a mystery.

Few people really know the terror of being lost in the sky. I had never experienced it before. For until then I had had sense enough to stay on the ground when the ceiling was having a bad mood. I suppose a sailor at sea has his bad moments when there is a heavy fog. But a boat can cut out its engines or haul down its sails and keep its fog-horn going, while a plane in the sky has to keep going. By twelve o'clock I was cursing the Wright Brothers for ever having thought of flying.

At half past twelve I quit heading south and began to circle, trying to find a hole in the ceiling. Then I climbed until my teeth began to chatter with cold. When I heard the motor wheezing I stopped climbing for fear it would freeze. Even near the sun, I couldn't see a break in the fog when I looked down. Finding it too cold at that

height, I let go and dropped.

But not too low. Beneath me could have been a city with tall buildings as thick as trees in a forest. Or I might have landed in a street filled with people and automobiles. Not only was my health in danger, if my impromptu air-port were too urban, but the lives of others were at stake.

At this point in my blind flight I thought of an incident which had happened out west. A flyer had been caught in a storm. When he came down, his plane knocked in the roof of a cabin and killed five people who were calmly eating supper. I didn't care to be the uninvited guest at some belated luncheon. I stayed at an altitude well above the possibility of even the tallest sky-scraper.

The Atlantic Ocean worried me too. In circling to find a hole in the ceiling I didn't know how far off my course I had gone. Was I over land or water?

I considered bailing out. But the plane, three bucks, and the clothes on my back were all I had. Without the plane I was utterly useless. And then if I did bail out--what if the plane flopped in a city street, or in some playground where a bunch of kids were gaily playing marbles? I decided to stick to the ship.

By half past two o'clock the fog was worse. My gas was running low. My tiny ship carried a tank which was likewise tiny. The plane wasn't built for long hours in the air. And at three o'clock, a couple of gallons of gas was all I had left.

Then I heard the motor sputter, cough, sputter some more. Several minutes later a lot of silence greeted my ears. I was on my way to a landing without the least idea where that would be.

Once I stood up, determined to dive out and trust myself to a parachute I'd never used before. The old joke about sending it

back to the factory if it didn't work crossed my mind. But again I decided to stick to the ship. It was all I had; maybe it would bring me down safely and still be able to take to the sky again.

Luckily, there was a slight tail wind which helped me level out into a long glide. My mind, at this time, was filled with the memory of my pals who had crashed. Some had been killed. Others had been maimed for life. If I crashed hard I hoped I'd either be hurt a little or killed out right. Now I was down to f ve hundred feet. A hundared feet. Fifty feet! Something went wrong with my lucky tail wind and I came out of the glide with a lurch. I felt the plane turn its nose straight down.

A moment before I hit, I closed my eyes. I felt a slight shock, I heard the propeller splinter. Then I opened my eyes.

Over my head was black fog. And all around me were black faces. The wheels of my plane were stuck fast in the dirt--dirt which had just come out of a grave. I found myself in a cemetery, the only white man at a colored funeral.

I stared at the moaners. They stared at me. There must have been two hundred Negroes grouped about that grave and I dont see how I missed knocking over a dozen of them. But I was unharmed and none of them were hurt. Perhaps we would have been still staring at one another if two women, heavily veiled, hadn't continued the weeping which I had interrupted.

Finally, the minister, a gray-haired Negro in a long frock coat, left the casket, which was several feet from the grave, and came to the plane.

Leaning close to me he whispered in my ear. "Mistah des as soon as yuh kin git yo breath--will yuh please git dat contraption outen dat grave so we kin git dis deah, good, departed brothur of ours

in it?"

"O. K., Reverend," I told him. "And will some of the pall-bearers lend me a hand?"

"Sho!"

And when they had buried the dead man they gave me their attention. They passed the hat and took up a collection. And with it I got enough money to buy a new propeller and a tank of gas with which I continued my journey to Trenton.

When ever my transport flights take me near their town, now a-days, I drop~~pe~~ into their church where I am a welcome visitor. And always I drop a bill in their collection plate--to make up for that propeller and gas they bought me a long time ago when aviation was a very tiny baby and I was a stunk flyer.